

SYRIA PRODUCING CHEMICAL WEAPONS, SOURCE SAYS
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WASHINGTON

Syria is producing chemical weapons, using technology obtained from a number of other countries, a knowledgeable U.S. source said Tuesday.

The disclosure came at a briefing for reporters at the State Department on the status of U.S. arms control negotiations. It would appear to expand the number of countries known to possess chemical weapons from four to five.

The others, named last year in Chemical and Engineering News, an authoritative trade publication, were the United States, the Soviet Union, France and Iraq.

A U.S. intelligence report in 1983 said Syria had probably the most advanced chemical warfare capability in the Arab world, with the possible exception of Egypt. But the report, drawn from the Central Intelligence Agency and other U.S. offices, said no Syrian facility producing chemical weapons had been identified.

The source, who refused to be identified by name, said in response to a question about Syria: "Yes, they are producing chemical weapons." Asked where Syria obtained its technology, he replied: "From a variety of places, I'm not going to get into that because it gets in sources and methods."

Syria is one of the few Arab countries siding with Iran in its protracted war with Iraq. Asked if Syria was providing Iran with chemical weapons, the source said "I think I better not answer that question."

The United States has accused Iraq of using chemical weapons against Iran and called for negotiations to end the costly conflict, which poses a potential threat to Persian Gulf oil shipments.

The Reagan administration has listed Syria as a nation that supports terrorism. From time to time, U.S. officials have implicated Syria in various terrorist incidents. On other occasions, the Reagan administration has appealed to Syria to intervene in behalf of American hostages.

Three weeks ago U.S. and Soviet negotiators met in Bern, Switzerland, to consider ways to contain the spread of chemical warfare technology to other countries. "There's a certain urgency in coming to grips with this problem," a senior U.S. official said Tuesday.

Another round probably will be held later in the spring, said the official, who insisted on anonymity.

The disclosure about Syria seemed to puzzle officials at the State Department and the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. Several said they were unaware Syria was producing chemical weapons. But another U.S. official, who demanded anonymity, told a reporter: "You are not going to get confirmation. It's just too sensitive."